

Description

Spatially Selective UHF Near Field Microstrip Coupler Device and RFID Systems Using Device

BACKGROUND OF INVENTION

[0001] 1. Field of the Invention

[0002] The invention relates to RFID systems, operable with a variety of different dimensioned electro-magnetically coupled transponders, working at close proximity, to an RF transceiver antenna that is spatially selective for an individual transponder located in a predetermined transponder operating region to the exclusion of other adjacent transponders, and its application to printers-encoders or other systems utilizing such in UHF RFID systems.

[0003] 2. Description of Related Art

[0004] UHF radio frequency identification (RFID) technology allows wireless data acquisition and or transmission from and or to active (battery powered) or passive transponders

using a backscatter technique. To communicate with, i.e., "read" from and or "write" commands and/or data to a transponder, the transponder is exposed to an RF electro-magnetic field by the transceiver that couples with and energizes (if passive) the transponder through electro-magnetic induction and transfers commands and data using a predefined "air interface" RF signaling protocol.

[0005] When multiple passive transponders are within the range of the same RF transceiver electro-magnetic field they will each be energized and attempt to communicate with the transceiver, potentially causing errors in "reading" and or "writing" to a specific transponder in the reader field.

Anti-collision management techniques exist to allow near simultaneous reading and writing to numerous closely grouped transponders in a common RF electro-magnetic field. However, anti-collision management increases system complexity, cost and delay response. Furthermore, anti-collision management is "blind" in that it cannot recognize where a specific transponder being processed is physically located in the RF electro-magnetic field, for example, which transponder is located proximate the print head of a printer-encoder.

[0006] One way to prevent errors during reading and writing to

transponders without using anti-collision management is to electrically isolate a specific transponder of interest from nearby transponders. Previously, isolation of transponders has used RF-shielded housings and/or anechoic chambers through which the transponders are individually passed for personalized exposure to the interrogating RF field. This requires that the individual transponders have cumbersome shielding or a significant spatial separation.

[0007] RFID printers-encoders have been developed which are capable of on-demand printing on labels, tickets, tags, cards or other media with which a transponder is attached or embedded. These printer-encoders have a transceiver for on-demand communicating with the transponder on the individual media to read and/or store data into the attached transponder. For the reasons given, it is highly desirable in many applications to present the media on rolls or other format in which the transponders are closely spaced. However, close spacing of the transponders exacerbates the task of serially communicating with each individual transponder without concurrently communicating with neighboring transponders on the media. This selective communication exclusively with an individual

transponder is further exacerbated in printers–encoders designed to print on the media in or near the same space as the transponder is positioned when being interrogated.

[0008] When transponders are supplied attached to a carrier substrate, for example in RFID–attached labels, tickets, tags or other media supplied in bulk rolls, Z–folded stacks or other format, an extra length of the carrier substrate is required to allow one transponder on the carrier substrate to exit the isolated field area before the next transponder in line enters it. The extra carrier substrate increases materials costs and the required volume of the transponder media bulk supply for a given number of transponders. Having increased spacing between transponders may also slow overall printer–encoder throughput.

[0009] When transponders of different sizes and form factors are processed, the RF shielding and or anechoic chamber configuration will also require reconfiguration, adding cost, complexity and reducing overall productivity. In certain printer–encoders it is desired to print on transponder–mounting media in the same transponder operating region in which the transponder is being read from or written to. This may be very difficult to accomplish if the transponder also must be isolated in a shielded housing

or chamber.

[0010] UHF transponders may operate in, for example, the 902 – 928 MHz band in the United States and other ISM bands designated in different parts of the world. For example, in Figure 1 a conventional one-half wavelength "Forward Wave" microstrip prior art coupler 3 consisting of a, for example, rectangular conductive strip 5 upon a printed circuit board 7 having a separate ground plane 9 layer configured for these frequencies. One end of the conductive strip 5 is connected to transceiver 42 and the other end is connected through terminating resistor 8 to ground plane 9. The conductive strip 5 as shown in Figure 1 has a significant width due to RF design requirements imposed by the need to create acceptable frequency response characteristics. This type of prior art coupler 3 has been used with UHF transponders that are relatively large compared to the extent of prior art coupler 3.

[0011] As shown by Figures 2a and 2b, recently developed transponders 1, designed for operation at UHF frequencies, have one dimension so significantly reduced, here for example a few millimeters wide, that they will be activated upon passage proximate the larger prior art coupler 3 by electro-magnetic power leakage 10 concentrated at

either side edge of the conductive strip 5 of prior art coupler 3. In Figure 2A, the two leakage regions "A" and "B" defined by electro-magnetic power leakage 10 are small and relatively far apart, increasing system logical overhead and media conveyance positioning accuracy requirements. If the transponders 1 were placed close together, then multiple transponders 1 might be activated by the physically extensive one-half wavelength "Forward Wave" microstrip prior art coupler 3.

[0012] Thus the minimum required spacing of these transponders 1 to isolate them, and thus the minimum size of media 11 (assuming that they are embedded one per label or media 11 on carrier substrate 13) must be large relative to the size of the microstrip coupler 3. This creates issues for media suppliers by limiting the available space on the media 11 for transponder 1 placement and significantly increasing the necessary accuracy of the transponder 1 placement within and or under the printable media 11 and along the liner or carrier substrate 13. This also reduces the cost advantages of using the narrow dimensioned transponder(s) 1 within media 11, as the media 11 must be much larger than the transponder 1 to achieve adequate RF isolation.

[0013] Competition in the market for such "integrated" printer-encoder systems as well as other RFID interrogation systems has focused attention on the ability to interrogate with high spatial selectivity any transponder from a wide range of available transponders having different sizes, shapes and coupling characteristics as well as minimization of overall system, media size and transponder costs.

[0014] Therefore, it is an object of the invention to provide a device, systems and methods that overcome deficiencies in such prior art.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0015] The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate embodiments of the invention and, together with a general description of the invention given above, and the detailed description of the embodiments given below, serve to explain the principles of the invention.

[0016] Figure 1 is a top view of a prior art microstrip forward wave coupler.

[0017] Figure 2a is a simplified cut-away side view of a transponder-coupler structure using a prior art forward wave coupler as shown in Figure 1, illustrating schematically locations where coupling with a narrow dimensioned

transponder supplied in-line with other transponders on a carrier substrate may occur.

[0018] Figure 2b is a partial cut-away top schematic view of the prior art forward wave coupler and carrier substrate with embedded transponders of Figure 2a.

[0019] Figure 3 is a side schematic view of a media printer according to one embodiment of the invention having an improved RFID interrogation system.

[0020] Figure 4a is a top view of a coupler according to one embodiment of the invention.

[0021] Figure 4b is a top view of a coupler according to another embodiment of the invention.

[0022] Figure 5a is a simplified cut-away side view of a transponder-coupler structure using a coupler according to the invention, illustrating schematically the spaced apart areas where coupling with a narrow dimensioned transponder supplied in-line with other transponders on a carrier substrate may occur.

[0023] Figure 5b is a partial cut-away top schematic view of the coupler according to the invention and carrier substrate with embedded transponders of Figure 5a.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0024] The present invention concerns apparatus and method

which enables an RFID transceiver (sometimes termed herein an "interrogator") to communicate selectively and exclusively with a single UHF transponder 1 when one or more other similar transponders are in close proximity, without the need for physical isolation or cumbersome shielded housings or chambers.

[0025] The invention is useful in the reading and or data loading of UHF transponders, for example on an assembly line, in distribution centers or warehouses where on-demand RFID labeling is required, and in a variety of other applications. In many applications a transponder or a number of transponders are mounted or embedded on or in a label, ticket, tag, card or other media carried on a liner or carrier. It is often desirable to be able to print on the media before, after, or during communication with a transponder. Although this invention is disclosed here in a specific embodiment for use with a direct thermal or thermal transfer printer, it may also be used with any type of spatially selective RFID interrogation device or other types of printers using other printing technologies, including inkjet, dot-matrix, and electro-photographic methods.

[0026] In some applications a print station may be at a distance from the RFID transceiver; in others it may be necessary to

accomplish the print function in the same target space occupied by the transponder when it is being interrogated.

[0027] Figure 3 illustrates by way of example only an implementation of the invention in a thermal transfer media printer 16 in which both printing and transponder communication are accomplished, but at different locations in the media printer 16. The media printer 16 includes a printhead sub-assembly comprising a conventional thermal print-head 18 and platen roller 19, as in a direct thermal printer for printing on thermally-sensitive media. A web 24 of media 11, such as labels, tickets, tags or cards, is directed along a feed path 26 under the printhead 18 where on-demand printing of text, bar codes and/or graphics takes place under control of a computer or microprocessor (not shown). After being printed, the media 11 follows a media exit path 34 and may be peeled off the underlying carrier substrate 13 at a peeler bar 32. The liner or carrier substrate 13 for the media is guided out of the media printer 16 by a roller 36 where it exits the printer along a carrier exit path 38.

[0028] When a thermal printer is configured for use as a thermal transfer printer, a ribbon supply roll 28 delivers a thermal

transfer ribbon (not shown for clarity) between printhead 14 and the media on web 24. After use, the spent ribbon is collected on a take-up reel 22.

[0029] In accordance with an aspect of the present invention, the media printer 16 includes a transceiver 42 for generating RF communication signals that are fed to a frequency and spatially selective microstrip near field coupler 30 located proximate the media feed path 26. As will be explained and illustrated in detail hereinafter, the system (including transceiver 42 and near field coupler 30) forms a near field pattern in the location of a transponder operating region C (see Figure 5A). The system is configured to establish at predetermined transceiver power levels a mutual coupling which exclusively activates and communicates with a single transponder 1 located in the transponder operating region C.

[0030] As labels or other media 11 with embedded transponders 1 move along the media feed path 26 through transponder operating region "C", data may be read from and or written to each transponder 1. Information indicia then may be printed upon an external surface of the media 11 as the media passes between the platen roller 19 and the printhead 18 by selective excitation of the heating ele-

ments in the printhead 18, as is well known in the art. When the media printer 16 is configured as a direct thermal printer, the heating elements form image dots by thermochromic color change in the heat sensitive media; when the media printer 16 is configured as a thermal transfer printer, then ink dots are formed by melting ink from the thermal transfer ribbon (not shown for clarity) delivered between printhead 18 and the media on web 24 from ribbon supply roll 28. Patterns of printed dots thus form the desired information indicia on the media 11, such as text, bar codes or graphics.

[0031] Media conveyance is well known in the art. Therefore the media conveyance 25 portion of the printer that drives the media with transponders along the media feed path 26 is not described in detail.

[0032] The near field coupler 30 according to the invention and its manner of operation will now be described with reference to Figures 4a–5b. One embodiment of the near field coupler 30 is configured for use, for example, with UHF RFID transponders. The RFID transponders 1 may be bulk supplied on a carrier substrate 13 attached to or embedded within label, ticket, card or tag media 11.

[0033] The near field coupler 30 comprises an array of lines 50,

as shown in Figures 4a and 4b. The near field coupler 30 is configured as a segment of unmatched line 50 upon a dielectric substrate, for example a printed circuit board 7, having a ground plane 9 formed on a spaced apart isolated layer, for example the reverse side of the printed circuit board 7. One end of the array of lines 50 is connected to the transceiver 42; the other end is connected to the ground plane 9 by means of terminating resistor 8.

[0034] Rather than operating as a standing wave radiating antenna, or magnetic field generating coil, the near field coupler 30 according to the invention operates as a one half wavelength unmatched transmission line with, for example, a 15 ohm characteristic impedance that is terminated by a $R=50$ ohm terminating resistor 8. Signals generated by the transceiver 42 passing along the transmission line generate a near field effect emanating from the transmission line edges that couples with a transponder 1 passing through the transponder operating region. Another description for the near field effect is "leaky", as discussed in "Leaky Fields on Microstrip" L.O. McMillian et al. Progress in Electromagnetics Research, PIER 17, 323-337, 1997 and hereby incorporated by reference in the entirety. Because the near field effect is extremely lo-

cal to the transmission line and degrades at an exponential rate with increasing distance from the transmission line, the resulting transponder operating region of a single transmission line is very narrow. According to the invention, the prior rectangular conductive strip is therefore replaced with an array formed by a plurality of commonly fed and terminated, i.e. electrically parallel, line(s) 50, as shown for example in Figures 4a and 4b. The plurality of lines 50 therefore creates an array of leaky edges as shown in Figure 5a; each leaky edge creating an electromagnetic power leakage 10 at several points within transponder operating region C. The resulting line array has similar overall width to the prior solid microstrip coupler 3 and may be similarly tuned, by adjusting the length, spacing and dielectric properties between the line(s) 50 and the ground plane 9 as well as the number of line(s) 50 and or individual line widths, shapes and inter-spacing, to adjust the overall array as an integrated single electrical structure to have the desired frequency response characteristics and generate a combined near field effect corresponding to a desired transponder operating region.

[0035] As shown by Figures 5a and 5b, the transponder operating region C resulting from a near field coupler 30 ac-

cording to the invention is substantially uniform. Depending upon spacing between the lines and applied power levels, narrow null gaps in the operational region C may occur, as illustrated by d, e, f, and g in Figure 5a. Simplified logic added to the media transport system may be used to move the media 11 forward a small increment, for example 1–2 millimeters if a transponder 1 in the transponder operating region C falls upon one of these null gaps and transponder communications is lost. These narrow null gaps are evidence of the extremely local field concentrations produced by the near field effect and the precision with which the transponder operating region may be configured to have a wide area and sharply defined boundaries. These characteristics make the near field coupler 30 useful for eliminating precision transponder placement requirements for media suppliers, complex transponder location and tracking logic in media supply systems, as well as any requirements for shielding or increased transponder placement tolerance requirements. Further, the increased transponder operating region C provided by the present invention allows users increased freedom to place embedded transponder(s) 1 in media 11 at desired locations, for example to avoid the printing

degradation that may occur when the printhead encounters a media surface irregularity due to the presence of a RFID transponder 1.

[0036] The array of lines 50 of the near field coupler 30 may be formed by a plurality of straight line(s) 50 as shown in Figure 4a. To further tune the near field produced by the line(s) 50, a zig-zag or wiggle may be applied to each line 50, as shown for example in Figure 4b to reduce the appearance and/or depth of the field strength gaps d, e, f and g. For the purpose of this specification, "zig-zag" is defined as a characteristic of a line having an overall length characteristic, but a plurality of direction changes internal to the overall length of the line. The direction changes may, for example, be sharply defined or occur as smooth curves.

[0037] Alternatively, a simplified transponder 1 read and or write system may be formed without printing capabilities by positioning a near field coupler 30 coupled to a transceiver 42 proximate a media conveyance 25 moving sequential transponders 1 through a transponder operating region C. This structure is also useful where the media 11 is unprinted, or printed upon at another location.

[0038] The near field coupler 30 is not limited to a dual plane

structure. For example, the near field coupler 30 may be co-planar, i.e. the ground plane and the array of lines 50 may be located, electrically isolated from each other, in the same plane of a printed circuit board but on different traces. Also, the lines 50 need not be co-planar, but may form a 3-dimensional structure. For example, the lines 50 may be on multiple layers of a printed circuit board or formed as a wire frame of lines 50 without use of printed circuit board technology.

[0039] Obviously, at some exaggerated transceiver power level, certain transponders 1 outside the transponder operating region C may be excited. However, by this invention, at appropriate power levels in the range of normal transponder read and write power levels the mutual coupling created will be highly selective for the transponder 1 in the transponder operating region C. By mapping and then applying only the required power levels for a range of both different transponder 1 types and positions within the transponder operating region C, energy consumption and potential RF interference generation may be minimized.

[0040] The spatially-selective near field property and the lack of any other shielding requirements of the near field coupler 30 according to the invention allows the economical addi-

tion of compact, spatially-selective transponder communication module in devices such as printer-encoders.

[0041] Because the near field coupler 30 may be configured to be selective exclusively for a single transponder located in the transponder operating region C, it is now possible by this invention to use a web 24 of media having transponders which are closely spaced on the web 24, as shown for example in the figures of this specification. Prior to this invention it was extremely difficult to communicate with just one electro-magnetically-coupled UHF transponder, which may have a wide number of different physical configurations, in a closely spaced series of transponders without simultaneously activating adjacent transponders.

[Table Heading]

1	transponder
3	prior art coupler
5	conductive strip
7	printed circuit board
8	terminating resistor
9	ground plane
10	electro-magnetic power leakage
11	media
13	carrier substrate
16	media printer

18	printhead
19	platen roller
22	take up reel
24	web
25	media conveyance
26	feed path
28	ribbon supply roll
30	near field coupler
32	tear bar
34	media exit path
36	roller
38	carrier exit path
42	transceiver
50	line

[0042] Where in the foregoing description reference has been made to ratios, integers or components having known equivalents then such equivalents are herein incorporated as if individually set forth.

[0043] While the present invention has been illustrated by the description of the embodiments thereof, and while the embodiments have been described in considerable detail, it is not the intention of the applicant to restrict or in any way limit the scope of the appended claims to such detail.

Additional advantages and modifications will readily appear to those skilled in the art. Therefore, the invention in its broader aspects is not limited to the specific details, representative apparatus, methods, and illustrative examples shown and described. Accordingly, departures may be made from such details without departure from the spirit or scope of applicant's general inventive concept. Further, it is to be appreciated that improvements and/or modifications may be made thereto without departing from the scope or spirit of the present invention as defined by the following claims.